

GOLD MEDAL OF VALOR

Lieutenant Vernon Wachter

On March 22, 2002, Acting Lieutenant Vernon Wachter, accompanied by firefighters Jay Morgan, Jason Adkins, Brent Harne, and Steven Schultz, responded to a fire call down a narrow, winding road in western Frederick County. They could not have imagined that the barely visible smoke trail they encountered upon arrival would become a fully-engulfed house fire; a fire that would nearly kill two of them.

Although dispatched as the 3rd-due engine, these firefighters were the first to arrive on the scene. They initially were puzzled by the lack of smoke, odor, and sound, but after an extensive search, they discovered fire in a space above the ceiling area in "Division 1" of the "Bravo" side of the home. The room over the fire was a storage room, filled with wall-to-wall boxes and clothing, and the firefighters began the daunting task of clearing and ventilating the room.

As the smoke progressed and visibility continued to disintegrate, Firefighter Schultz pulled up a corner of a board and immediately felt a tremendous amount of heat enter the room. The heat began to burn him underneath his gear, and he realized that he had nowhere to go. He yelled for Lieutenant Wachter to open the water line, but was told there was no water pressure. In extreme pain, Firefighter Schultz crawled up and over several large boxes in order to get down on the floor. As conditions deteriorated, both men began backing out to the hallway to wait for another attack line. It was at this point that a flashover occurred, resulting in a backdraft.

Lieutenant Wachter and Firefighter Schultz were trapped. The doorway to the room was obstructed, the hose line was severed, and the radio was melted. There would be no "Mayday."

Hearing out of only one ear, barely able to breathe, and seeing only what was visible through a small opening in his facepiece, Firefighter Schultz yelled "Window" and felt himself being turned toward it by Lieutenant Wachter. Although he couldn't see the window, Firefighter Schultz could tell that the fire

was venting in a certain direction and he surmised that it could only be the window . . . and the way out.

On his first try at getting out the window, . . .he missed, . . . hitting the wall and collapsing on the floor. Fearing that the delay would cost him and Lieutenant Wachter their lives, he forced himself up off the floor, heaved himself through the window frame, and fell headfirst onto the roof. Lieutenant Wachter hit the roof immediately after and screamed for Firefighter Schultz to “jump!” Still blinded by his melted facepiece, Firefighter Schultz decided to hang from the spouting to get as low as he could before letting go. He hit the ground and rolled backwards. Lieutenant Wachter landed a few feet away.

Firefighter Schultz, who nominated Lieutenant Wachter for the Gold Medal of Valor stated, “I am here to tell anyone and everyone that were it not for Lieutenant Wachter, I would not be here now. He truly saved my life.”

For remaining calm, providing decisive orders, and following nationally accepted firefighting tactics and strategies, Lieutenant Wachter is hereby awarded the Gold Medal of Valor.